Socrates:
His Life and Times

Education and Family Life

Although Socrates is a central figure in western philosophy, little is actually known about him. He left no writings of his own, and what is known is derived largely from two of his pupils, Plato and Xenophon, and scraps from other ancient authors.

According to one ancient source Socrates was born in Athens in the fourth year of the 77th Olympiad on the sixth day of the month of Thargelion. He lived (469-399) during the century that has been called the Golden Age of Athens. The Greeks had stopped the Persians at Marathon in 490 and turned them away for good in 480/479 at Salamis and Plataea. With security from foreign encroachment the way was prepared for Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Pericles, the Sophists, and Socrates.

Socrates was the son of Sophroniscus, a sculptor and stone-mason. His mother was Phaenarete, a midwife. A later historical source says that the wealthy Athenian Crito was so taken with the grace of Socrates'soul that he took him out of the stone-mason's workshop and paid for his education. Whatever the cause, Crito and Socrates did become life-long friends. In his younger days Socrates was a pupil of Anaxagoras. When Anaxagoras was condemned at Athens, Socrates became a pupil of Archelaus, the physicist, who had also been trained by Anaxagoras.

Although he was a favorite pupil of Archelaus, eventually he gave up on these "pre-Socratic" philosophies and was attracted to the topics raised by the Sophists. One dialogue of Plato has a young Socrates listening to Zeno of Elea reading a treatise and talking with him and Parmenides. Some scholars credit Parmenides as the first teacher to use the question and answer method. Interestingly, Socrates also credits two women as important teachers. One was Aspasia, Pericles' mistress and second wife, who, Socrates claimed, taught him rhetoric. Some ancient sources credit her as the author of Pericles' famous funeral oration. The other woman is Diotima of Mantineia, who Socrates states, instructed him in love, but whether she was human or a spirit, scholars still debate!

Even though there is little evidence that Socrates did much to make a living, some sources say that he was employed on the stone-work of the draped figures of the Graces on the Acropolis. This is not unlikely since this work was commissioned by Pericles, as a public works project, when Socrates was a young man. Although Socrates never seems to be engaged in work, he did have some small savings to entrust to the care of a friend at the time of his death. Some people believe he lived off a small inheritance from his father. Earlier in life he had had enough money to own a suit of armor when he was a hoplite in the Athenian military. This was the middle class branch of the service in the Athenian democracy. The rich provided the cavalry, the poor rowed for the Athenian fleet or served as marines.

Socrates was married at least once and had three children. His best know and, perhaps only, wife was Xanthippe. Xanthippe did not share Socrates' interest in philosophy and

according to Xenophon she was "the hardest to get along with of all the women there are–yes, or all that ever were, I suspect, or ever will be." Socrates jokingly replied that "Mankind at large is what I wish to deal with; and so I have got her, well assured that if I can endure her, I shall have no difficulty in my relations with all the rest of human kind." In Xanthippe's defense, it was the role of the wife to run the household accounts and with a husband who prided himself for not taking fees for his teaching that must have been difficult. Given the relative youth of Socrates' two youngest children at the time of his death at age 70, his wife Xanthippe was probably much younger than he was. Despite her reputation as a shrew who had no problem arguing with her husband in public when Socrates was about to be executed, she sat by his side with his youngest son on her knee until she became too overwhelmed with emotion to stay.

His Philosophical Career

At the high point of his philosophical career, Socrates day started with a morning trip to the gymnasia or the places where people walked for exercise. Next he moved on to the Agora, the marketplace, which was the political, civic, and commercial center of the city. Many evenings he would attend parties given by his friends and students where intellectual conversation was the highlight of the night's entertainment. Wherever he went anyone was free to listen, Socrates never charged for his teachings and actually turned down large gifts from his wealthier students although he seems to have accepted small gifts of practical things.

In this speech at his trial Socrates explained the event which led him into his career questing for wisdom. His friend from youth, Chaerephon, a leader of the democratic party in Athens, went to the Delphic oracle asking if there was anyone who was wiser than Socrates, and the oracle responded that there was not. Since Socrates was not aware of any real wisdom within himself, he decided to see if he could find someone else who was wise. Therefore he went to those who claimed they were wise---statesmen, poets, artisans, and others. This was Socrates' interpretation of his mission commanded by the oracle of the god Apollo. However, after questioning and cross-examining these men, Socrates discovered they were not really wise after all. Since he was not able to find the wisdom he was seeking and because he considered this task more important than anything else, the pursuit of wisdom became Socrates' full-time job for the rest of his life.

In 423 B. C. Aristophanes' comedy The Clouds was produced and "won" third place out of three plays entered in the competition of that year (The version we now have was revised before it was published a few years later). The main character was Socrates, then aged 46, which clearly shows he has already well known a quarter century before his death (the second place comedy of that year also had him as a central character). The Aristophanes' character worships clouds and other scientific phenomena rather than the gods while running a "think-shop" for those that would learn the "unjust logic." Aristophanes was a friend of Socrates who knew this blend of Pre-Socratic ideas and Sophist attitudes did not represent the real views of his friend–that was part of the fun of the play. But since all of Athens saw the work, it helped establish a negative public attitude towards Socrates that he still had to defend himself against at his trial in 399 B.C.

Two of Socrates' students have left extended descriptions of him. One, Xenophon, was a

successful military man who saw Socrates as a witty man trying to give commonsense advice to his fellow citizens. Plato, on the other hand, was a brilliant and original writer and a great philosopher in his own right. Socrates became the stock character in Plato's philosophical dialogues throughout his own long career. Which ideas are actually Socrates' and which are Plato's is still being debated. One thing is clear, however, the two leading chroniclers of Socrates hated each other!

Socrates spent most of his time asking question about ethical issues. He had a knack for asking questions exposing ignorance, hypocrisy, and conceit among his fellow Athenians, particularly in regard to moral questions. In all probability, he was disliked by most of them except when he was making fools of people they disliked! However, Socrates did have a loyal following especially among the young.

Although he never met Socrates, Aristotle, Plato's most famous student, probably had the best grasp of what ideas were really Socratic. He said "Socrates…was busying himself about ethical matters and… seeking the universal in these matters, and fixed thought for the first time on universal definitions." As we shall see Plato took this idea and turned it into his own philosophy of ideal universal forms. Socrates, according to Aristotle, never separated the universals or definitions from the things they described. This emphasis on definition came about because Socrates believed that only a completely accurate definition could be the basis for a logical argument. He went so far as to argue that knowledge was virtue believing that if one truly knew all the definitions they could not help but act virtuously. His emphasis on words and their meanings ties him to his contemporaries, the sophists, but also to many post-modern philosophers today!.

The Peloponnesian War

The most important event of Socrates life was the Peloponnesian War. Without it Socrates might have simply been a footnote to history. This war was a disastrous twenty-seven year struggle (431-404 B.C.E.) between the rival Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta. Growing economic rivalry as well as political differences (Sparta was a military dictatorship and Athens a democracy) provided the backdrop to the conflict.

Socrates himself fought in the opening battle of the war at Potidaea in 432 B.C.. Under the leadership of Thucydides, he fought again at Amphipolis in 424. After the Athenian defeat there, the government exiled Thucydides who took up the writing of history to fill his time. Socrates final service was at Delium. By the time his military service ended Socrates was in his mid-forties. As an armored infantryman Socrates served with distinction showing both bravery and endurance in harsh conditions. During one battle he even rescued his wounded pupil Alcibiades. His military service was apparently the only time in his life that he left the general vicinity of Athens.

The war can be divided into three phases. The initial phase lasted from 431 B.C. to 421 B.C.. The second phase was a period of cold war during a truce that lasted from 420 to 414. The last phase actually began in 415 when the Athenians invaded Sicily and ended in disastrous defeat for Athens in 404 B.C.. That defeat for Athens was nearly inevitable from 413 B.C. when they lost the Sicilian campaign.

Socrates had friends in both the democratic and oligarchic party, and did his best to avoid

politics unlike most Athenians of his time. If he opposed injustice and illegality publicly, he might have been put to death much sooner; therefore he chose to fight for right as a private citizen. He did openly oppose the Sicilian expedition of 415 and since much of Athens government was chosen by lot, he could not avoid political service entirely. At one point chance decided that Socrates was President of the Athenian Senate when it wanted to try together the naval commanders who had not buried the dead after their victory at Arginusae, the bloodiest battle of the war, in 406 B.C.. It was clearly illegal to group them all together, not allow them time to prepare their defense, and because the popular assembly was not a court and had no right to condemn them to death. In spite of popular opinion at the time, Socrates flatly refused to be a party to the illegality, but six men were condemned and executed anyway. After the executions, when public sentiment calmed, the illegality was generally recognized and Socrates was praised for his stand.

Despite friends in the democratic party and his claim to be a pure thinker, Socrates ideas about democracy were very critical. His views came to be associated with those of the anti-democratic factions that actually supported Sparta during the war.

Three of Socrates's students played major roles in the war. The egotistical and unstable Alcibiades was the first to have an impact. A relative of the great Pericles, he had been raised in Pericles' own household and was Socrates favorite student. Brilliant, handsome, rich, and of noble birth, Alcibiades had it all, except for a good character. In 415 B.C. Alcibiades convinced the Athenians to send a large fleet to Sicily to attack a Spartan ally. This was a tremendously risky operation, and Socrates and older generals argued against it. The night before the fleet was to sail from Athens, a major incident of vandalism occurred. Athenians awoke to find that statues (in the shape of a phallus) of the god Hermes which stood at street corners throughout Athens had been chipped and broken during the night. Normally such an ill-omen would have delayed the sailing of the fleet until the proper rituals had brought back good luck (and male fertility) to the city, but Alcibiades was intent upon sailing perhaps because some Athenians thought he might be responsible for the vandalism! When Alcibiades reached Italy with 27,000 men and 260 ships, word came from Athens that he had been accused of revealing the secrets of the Eleusinian Mysteries to slaves in the course of a parody at a drunken dinner party! Rather than face the death penalty at home, he fled to the enemy Spartans and revealed all the Athenian battle plans. Sparta renewed the war against Athens in 414.

The commander who took over for Alcibiades was a religious conservative. When an eclipse of the moon occurred just before he sent his troops into battle, he delayed for twenty-seven days while the proper rituals were completed to guarantee the return of the full moon. This gave the enemy time to surround and eventually capture both the Athenian army and its fleet.

Back home in Athens it turned out that the Hermes' statues had actually been destroyed by anti-democratic, pro-Spartan groups of upper class youths. These young oligarchs organized themselves into secret political clubs with the goal of overthrowing Athenian democracy. They insisted that a small group of elite leaders could manage Athenian policy better then the democratic assembly. In exile in Sparta, Alcibiades furthered their cause by promising to make an alliance with the Persia governors in western Turkey and secure funds from them for Athens if only the democracy would be overturned and an oligarchy installed. Alcibiades

apparently hoped that the abolition of the democracy would led to the possibility of his being permitted to return to Athens. He had two reasons to want to go home again. First, his negotiations with the Persians had aroused the suspicions of the Spartans, and, second, he had seduced the wife of one of Sparta's two kings.

Alcibiades' promises helped the oligarchical sympathizers in Athens to play on the assembly's hopes by holding out the lure of Persian gold. In 411 they succeeded in having the assembly members turn over all power to a group of four hundred men, hoping that this smaller body would provide better guidance for foreign policy in the war and improve Athens' finances. These four hundred were supposed to choose five thousand to act as the city's ultimate governing body, but they, in fact, kept all power in their own hands. The oligarchic regime did not last more than a few months, however. In Athens, the oligarchs soon lost their unity by struggling with each other for dominance. A mutiny in the Athenian fleet, which was staunchly democratic, caused the oligarchs to step aside. In response, a mixed democracy and oligarchy called the Constitution of the Five Thousand was created, which voted to recall Alcibiades and others in exile in the hope that they could improve Athenian military leadership. At first this proved successful, but when Alcibiades lost a minor skirmish in 406 B.C., he again fled into exile, this time in Persia, to avoid the wrath of the Athenian public.

During this last phase of the war two other students of Socrates became leaders in the oligarchic faction. The most important was Critias, the second cousin of Plato, the other was the uncle of Plato, Charmides. When Athens finally lost the war in 404, the Spartans installed a puppet government of thirty oligarchs led by Critias. Fearing the possible return of Alcibiades, Critias convinced the Spartans to send assassins to kill the man who once had been a fellow pupil of Socrates. Then Critias ordered the killing of Athenians from the middle and poor classes that totaled as many people as the Spartans had killed in battle over the last ten years of the war. The democratic element including Socrates old friend Chaerephon and his soon-to-be accuser Anytus fled Athens and waged a civil war that retook the city the next year. To have it said that you had stayed in the city during the civil war was thereafter a mark of reproach, but Socrates did stay and many feel it was his connection to Alcibiades and especially Critias that was really behind his trial in 399 B.C.

When the civil war ended with the democrats victorious, they did one thing not done before or since-- they forgave their opponents. An amnesty was offered. Even the oligarchs were offered amnesty without an acre of their lands being confiscated or a copper obol of their money seized. They were not loved, they were not respected, but they were allowed to live in peace. Critias and Charmides, a man who Socrates had once urged to go into government, didn't live to see the armistice. Before they were overthrown, the Thirty Tyrants had carved out a temporary refuge in the small village of Eleusis, where they murdered 300 of the male citizens on a trumped up charge, having forced an Athenian assembly to vote in a death sentence without trial. In the last skirmish of the civil war, Critias and Charmides were killed in battle just outside Eleusis and then the amnesty was declared.

What was Socrates role in all this? Certainly, if he was advocating the kind of government found in Plato's Republic which was based on a Spartan, not an Athenian model, Socrates could not have been very popular with the democrats of Athens in the latter stages of the war. Coupled with the disastrous careers of his students Alcibiades, Critias, and Charmides,

Socrates must have been associated in the public mind with the terrible defeat and disgrace of his home city. However, Socrates proved as uncooperative with tyranny as he was critical of democracy.

In reality, Socrates had broken with Critias a long time before he came to power. The final break came, it is said, when Socrates called Critias "a pig" for seducing a young man named Euthydemus. When he came to power, Critias thought to implicate Socrates and others in his crimes by deputizing them to arrest people who supported democracy. The arrested men were quickly executed. Socrates simply took the arrest warrant given to him and went home without every issuing it. As the tyranny continued he criticized the Thirty for making the people worse the way a herder did by reducing his herd. When they heard this Critias and Charmides called Socrates to them and read aloud their new decree banning the teaching of the art of debate in Athens. Despite this lightly veiled threat to his life, Socrates continued to teach.

In examining the charge that Socrates actually created these political monsters, Xenophon wrote that some ambitious men followed Socrates in the hopes of becoming better skilled in the arts of debate and politics, and as long as they stayed with Socrates they were better men. They stopped associating with him because he annoyed them by exposing their mistakes.

The Trial of Socrates

The hostility some Athenians felt toward Socrates after the violence of the Thirty Tyrants encouraged the distinguished Athenian democrat, Anytus, who had suffered personally under that regime, to join with two other men of lesser prominence in prosecuting Socrates in 399 B.C. Since the amnesty prevented their bringing any charges directly related to the period of tyranny, they accused Socrates with the following charge: "Socrates is guilty of not believing in the gods in which the state believes, but brings in other new divinities; he also wrongs by corrupting the youth." Since Athenian law did not specify precisely what offenses constituted impiety, the accusers had to convince the jurors in the case that what Socrates taught was impious,

In his defense Socrates gave a spontaneous speech relying on reason, refuting all the charges one by one and explaining why he did not choose to bring in his wife and children to plead for him as was customary.

There were 501 men on the jury, and he was condemned by 60 votes. The prosecutors proposed the death penalty, and Socrates had the opportunity to offer an alternative. Not believing he had committed any wrong, he first suggested free meals for himself at public expense for his long-time role as a "gadfly of the Athenian people." This was naturally unpopular with a jury which had just found him guilty. He ruled out exile and imprisonment as unfitting for him, and finally suggested a minimal fine of one mina. However, his friends Plato, Crito, Critobulus, and Aristobulus told him they would pay 30 minas for him. Socrates had offered the equivalent of a few dollars, and his friends had made it several hundred dollars. However, the jury had become more antagonized, and the vote for the death penalty was greater than the vote to convict by eighty changed votes. According to Xenophon the death penalty was illegal except in proved cases of thievery, kidnapping, and temple-robbing, but this was not the first time that Athenian courts violated their own laws in a sensationalized case.

With his death from hemlock poison Socrates became the most famous of all philosophers.

In life he was very influential in the lives of Plato, Xenophon, Euclid the Geometer, and the founders of several later schools of philosophy. Socrates has been admired by many throughout the ages for his willingness to explore an argument wherever it would lead as well as having the moral courage to follow his beliefs despite the consequences.